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## The story of California Chardonnay - part 1



*This is the first of a four-part account of California's most-planted vine variety.*

Today Chardonnay is the most widely planted, and successfully sold, grape variety in the state of California, and occupies a similar position in the rest of the world, but its rise to such prominence is relatively recent.

It was not until the 1970s, by which time three key events had occurred in the United States, that plantings of Chardonnay in the state really took off. Sales of table wines finally surpassed those of dessert wines; the price of grapes finally surpassed the cost of farming them; and clonal selections increased average yields. At the start of the 1960s there were only 300 acres (120 ha) of Chardonnay planted in the whole of California (Pinney 1989).

The results of the [Judgment of Paris](#) tasting in 1976, in which Chateau Montelena's 1973 Chardonnay famously 'beat' some top white burgundy, helped increase public interest, but on its own would not have offered enough momentum had yields, grape prices, and interest in table wine not already been established. By 2000, Chardonnay had secured its position as the most-planted variety in the state. Today, more than 100 clonal selections of Chardonnay exist in California, with the diversity of plant material derived from a mix of treatments, supplemented by heritage selections and newer imports from around the world. This will be discussed at more length.

The following four-part history looks primarily at premium wine, although the historical information also gives some insight into how Chardonnay became such a commodity wine as well. The research includes my own extensive interviews with vintners throughout California, reading of transcripts from historic oral interviews of vintners throughout the state, relevant California grape-harvest reports, and various books on wine. Some of the books relevant to this material are listed at the end of each instalment. As always, even more producers could be mentioned along the way. This is meant to give an overall narrative of how the variety grew to its stature and how its styles and interests evolved over time, rather than to cover every producer, which would demand a book rather than just a very, very long four-part article.

The subject is something I find fascinating as it serves as an interesting lens into the world of wine. While Chardonnay certainly originates in France, its popularity as a varietal category starts in California. Before varietal labelling began in the United States in the late 1930s, Chardonnay had never been recognised as such. By the late 1970s, varietal labelling had become so common in the United States market that demand forced vintners to rely on it. It became almost impossible to sell wine that was not varietally labelled. It is only in our current decade that a rise of non-varietally specific red blends has become a market trend.

The practice of varietal labelling spread to both South Africa and Australia, establishing it as the norm throughout the New World. Based on all of this, it is my claim, then, that Chardonnay as a category is one of California's three unique contributions to the world of wine. Surely Chardonnay was bottled on its own first in France, but was not labelled or spoken of as such, and it clearly has now taken hold worldwide, based on origins of the trend in California. (Incidentally, I believe the other two unique contributions are Zinfandel, first recognised in California, and mountain Cabernet. Other singular examples of high-elevation Cabernet Sauvignon exist in the world but nowhere else does it stand with such proliferation and distinctive character as a fully, distinctively recognised category.)

### **The arrival of Chardonnay: pre-Prohibition to the 1940s**

Chardonnay arrived in the United States prior to Prohibition. Its earliest years are somewhat confused. Clonal identification at the time was both more difficult and to some degree also less of a priority compared with today's practices. In several cases, Chardonnay was confused with Pinot Blanc and in some cases with Melon de Bourgogne as well. The impact of these misidentifications is such that some regions of California technically had the variety before they knew they did. Napa Valley is one such example, as will be discussed later.

It is known that California definitely had Chardonnay by the 1880s. The first documented arrival was in 1882 when Charles Wetmore imported budwood from Meursault and established it in his Livermore vineyard, La Cresta Blanca (Asher 1990). As head of the California State Viticultural Commission, Wetmore was invested in diversifying plant material in the state and so also gave

cuttings to nurseries in the region. By the end of the 1880s, nursery catalogues were offering the selection to wineries (Sweet 2007). Early in the following century the Wetmore selection would become an integral portion of what is now known as the Wente selection, but was not solely responsible for it. The Wente family also imported budwood from the nursery at the University of Montpellier in southern France in 1912 (Sweet 2007). Importantly, Paul Masson also had an impact on California's selections.

In 1896, Masson brought back both Pinot Noir and Chardonnay cuttings from Burgundy and established them first in his Livermore vineyard, and soon afterwards at his eponymous Santa Cruz Mountains site. Oral history transcripts with Martin Ray, who was good friends with Masson, assert that the cuttings came from Masson's friend Louis Latour.

These three selections are the important first imports of the cultivar to the United States. According to oral history transcripts with Ernest Wente, the Wente family took cuttings of the Wetmore selection from the Gier Vineyard in Livermore in 1908. When they brought their own cuttings from southern France those were planted alongside the Wetmore selection. The combination marks the beginning of what together is now known as the Wente selection. Masson's site, on the other hand, became the source of Martin Ray's budwood, which he planted in the early 1940s on what is now called Mount Eden in the Santa Cruz Mountains. By the end of Prohibition the Wente and Masson vineyards were the only substantial sources for budwood in California.

During Prohibition (1918–1933) vineyard acreage through the state of California actually increased (Pinney 1989). Under the law, heads of household were allowed to make what was called 'fruit juices'. A new market for grapes and grape bricks [concentrated grape juice] took hold in the eastern states as a result, with heads of household buying West Coast grapes to make wine at home in the east. Grapes and grape bricks were shipped to East Coast customers by train and so had to be hearty enough to survive the journey. As a result, vineyards were largely replanted to cultivars durable enough to survive the train ride east. White varieties almost entirely disappeared. In the grape harvest report of 1930, total vineyard acreage in California was around 600,000 acres (242,800 ha), with the statewide total of white grapes planted, across all varieties, being just 7,000 acres, consisting primarily of Riesling and Sémillon. Plantings of Chardonnay were so small that the variety was not recorded specifically.

The Repeal of Prohibition in 1933 was quickly followed by another challenge. By the second half of the 1930s, the tensions in Europe that led to the Second World War were already restricting trade between the United States and Europe. As a result, the United States was unable to get imports of wine from France and was also unable to export any wine to Europe. California wines had garnered some respect in the UK and Europe prior to Prohibition. While some wineries were able to stay afloat during Prohibition by making 'sacramental wine' (allowed) and shipping grapes to the East Coast, none was able to continue exporting wines. The reputation of American wine both abroad and domestically therefore essentially disappeared. Imports of European wine to the East Coast restarted after Prohibition with brokers throughout the major cities offering their own catalogues. However, by 1941 US access to French wine was essentially gone. Following Prohibition, Frank Schoonmaker was the only East Coast wine broker to have taken US wine seriously and done the work of identifying US wines worth representing.

Schoonmaker began his own Frank Schoonmaker Selections in 1936. In 1939, he traveled the United States looking for wines worthy of distribution. As a result, within his catalogue were wines from California, New York, Ohio and Delaware. Included among them was California Chardonnay. From its start, Schoonmaker Selections wines were labelled under the founder's

name, followed by variety, producer and region. While some examples of varietal labelling existed in the United States prior to Prohibition, such cases were rare and inconsistent. They also tended to apply to varieties such as Catawba from Ohio.

The effects of the war made Schoonmaker's choice significant, as his portfolio quickly became one of the most important sources of wine in the United States (Pinney 1989). Included within it were the wineries Wente, Martini, Inglenook, Beaulieu, Paul Masson and others. Through Schoonmaker therefore these wineries were among the first to release varietally labelled wine to a national market (Pinney 1989). Back in California, Wente was using varietal labelling for wines distributed throughout the West Coast as well. According to Phil Wente, Ernest believed the key to long-term success for the winery was rooted in consumer education, and varietal labelling was one step in that process. Even after he had stopped working with Schoonmaker, Wente continued to rely on varietal labelling.

The timing of Schoonmaker's practice of varietal labelling was shared with one other influential individual. In his own lifetime, Masson's efforts in wine were primarily dedicated to sparkling wine. However, his commitment to quality, and varietal specificity made him an important influence for the younger Martin Ray, who otherwise took inspiration from France. The difficulties of maintaining Chardonnay and Pinot Noir vineyards through Prohibition were not lost on Paul Masson. After the end of Prohibition, in his seventies, Masson decided to sell his business. In 1936, Ray purchased Masson's winery and vineyard, against the advice even of Masson himself. Ray immediately began making varietally specific table wine from the site under the Paul Masson label. Ray staunchly believed the only way to make world-class wine was to be varietally focused and so he also labelled the wines as such. By 1940, Ray's wines under the Masson label were being featured in New York City. As a result, Ray's varietal labeling overlapped with that of Schoonmaker and together the two helped change expectations within the United States.

By 1946, Ray decided to take Masson's original advice. He gathered budwood from Masson's vineyard and planted it on a site at 2,000 ft (610 m) elevation one hill over, and established what was then Ray's eponymous vineyard. In the late 1970s it was renamed Mount Eden. Over time, the Pinot Noir selection was largely replaced by newer Dijon cuttings due to virus issues. The Chardonnay on the site, however, remains largely the original Masson-derived material, today known as the Mount Eden selection.

Into the 1940s, most of the action in California Chardonnay rested with these original founders. Over time, Ernest Wente began honing the selection in his Chardonnay blocks, choosing healthier vines to propagate and establishing them in newer vineyards. Oral transcripts suggest that these selections were also propagated in the UC Davis West research vineyard known as Armstrong. The Armstrong selection was then brought to newer vineyards at UC Davis itself in the 1950s and distributed through California from 1956 until 1961.

UC Davis then stopped distributing the selection and instead began doing heat-treatment experiments on other selections (also ultimately originating from Wente, as will be discussed shortly), resulting in several new clones from the material (Sweet 2007). Today, such clonal selections are available through Foundation Plant Services (FPS). As a result of the combination of (a) the original Wente vineyard itself, (b) the similar selection in the Armstrong vineyard that was briefly a UC Davis source, and (c) the proliferation of treated material of apparently Wente-derived selections from elsewhere, it can be quite hard to pin down the actual source material when producers say they have Wente selection in their vineyard. Generally, however, when people refer to the Wente selection they mean that their Chardonnay displays a tendency

to *millerandage*, or hen and chicken fruit set. (Brian Croser explores how these clones then made their way to Australia in his [July 2018 article](#).)

In 1946, Ernest Wente let Fred and Eleanor McCrea collect budwood from his vineyard blocks within which he had honed the best vines. With these cuttings they established their Spring Mountain District site, Stony Hill. At the same time, Stony Hill took Riesling cuttings from nearby Inglenook. Though the Stony Hill winery was not bonded until 1952, they began planting in 1946. The project was unusual in that it was the first new post-Prohibition winery in Napa Valley, and was dedicated entirely to whites. They also established Gewurztraminer, Sémillon and a small amount of Pinot Blanc. At the same time, Jack Taylor began planting Chardonnay in his Mayacamas Vineyard. (I have not yet located where the Mayacamas cuttings originated.) Together, Mayacamas and Stony Hill were the first to knowingly establish Chardonnay in Napa Valley.



Peter McCrea (immediately above and above right), who helped his parents plant the original vineyards at Stony Hill, explained to me during an interview that the original Riesling blocks on the site included up to 30% 'errant' vines. After doing additional research, the McCreas were able to determine that (1) the errant vines were all Chardonnay, and (2) the vines originated from the Inglenook block that was the source of the McCreas' Riesling cuttings. According to vineyard managers, the original Inglenook Riesling had always included these unusual vines mixed with the Riesling plants, but they were all simply farmed, harvested and vinified together. (Here it is helpful to note that varietal specificity was not a significant cultural concern at the time, nor was varietal labelling.) This is proof therefore that Chardonnay was already present in Napa Valley before the establishment of Stony Hill but was never regarded as such.

It is important to note that the Stony Hill selection came directly from the original Wente vineyard, not via UC Davis. Stony Hill went on to give budwood to several important producers in the North Coast, including Hanzell (to be discussed further) and Louis Martini Carneros. Importantly, the Martini Chardonnay derived from Stony Hill was eventually taken back to UC Davis and heat-treated. Clone 4 is one of the better-known selections to result from this process and proliferated throughout California as it combines good yields with relatively high acidity. These higher yields led to its being disparaged by producers who came to believe that high yields are incongruent with high quality. However, today many quality-focused producers defend clone 4 precisely because of its higher natural acidity, most especially in either older vines or naturally lower-yielding sites. Clone 5 was also derived from the Martini selections. Together, clones 4 and 5 became what are known as selection 108, which later made its way into the Willamette Valley in Oregon. The reputation of 108 in Oregon follows a similar history to that of clone 4 in California. Producers in Oregon disparaged the higher yields and the later-

ripening character of 108, calling it a mismatch for the cooler climate of Willamette Valley. However, today a number of producers claim that in older vines especially and also in lower-yielding sites, 108 shows good natural complexity and better acid retention than the newer Dijon clones.

See *part 2: the 1950s to the 1970s*

### **Additional reading**

Gerald Asher, 1990, 'Chardonnay: Buds, Twigs and Clones', *Gourmet*

Robert Benson, 1977, *Great Winemakers of California*

Doris Muscatine, Maynard Amerine, Bob Thompson, 1984, *The Book of California Wine*

Thomas Pinney, 1989, *A History of Wine in America, Volumes 1 & 2*

Frank Prial, 2001, *Decantations: Reflections on Wine*

Nancy Sweet, FPS, UC Davis, 2007, 'Chardonnay History and Selections at FPS', *FPS Grape Program Newsletter*

George Taber, 2005, *Judgment of Paris: California vs France and the historic 1976 Paris tasting that revolutionized wine*

FPS Grapes, Grape Variety: [Chardonnay](#)

Focus on Chardonnay (proceedings of a four-yearly meeting of Chardonnay producers from around the world, available from the participating wineries only)

[University of California Oral History Project](#): including Ernest Wente, Wente Family, Mike Grgich, Zelma Long, Eleanor McCrea, Maynard Joslyn